

[Material]

# Motivational Behavior and Perceived Proficiency of Japanese Undergraduate L2 Learners: A Pilot Study

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## Abstract

As English education in Japan slowly shifts towards a communication based classroom, it is more important than ever to understand how students are motivated in this new style of classroom, and how that motivation is related to student personality traits. This pilot study tested tools for assessing both motivation and personality in Japanese university classrooms. This study correlates the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009) with student personality traits as assessed by the Big Five personality construct (Goldberg, de Raad, & Hofstee, 1992), along with perceived proficiency. Tentative results suggest that motivation is related to extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, while perceived proficiency is correlated to conscientiousness and openness.

## Introduction:

As English education continues to change in Japan to match the demands of a more globalized world, it has become more important to consider how the classroom environment effects students' motivation and learning results. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan (MEXT) has called for major changes with the goal of creating a more active learning environment. This is a move away from the more traditional grammar translation teaching method that was widely used in Japan in the past (2014a). As a result, Japanese students are forced to adapt their learning behavior. It is widely acknowledged that motivation is an important factor for second language learning. However, there is little in the literature addressing what this means in terms of the connections between motivation, perceived proficiency, and personality traits. This study uses the Big Five personality traits to correlate the motivational behavior of Japanese undergraduates with the L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2009) and their perceived proficiency.

This study was conducted during 2016, a period of considerable change in the Japanese education system. MEXT reforms have been making major changes and the results of those changes have

been slowly beginning to influence the classroom setting and in turn how students perceive English. It is in this context that this study investigates the motivation of university students who have completely primary and secondary education in schools that have undergone various English education reforms. These students had experienced the changes implemented by MEXT from exposure to English from elementary school. In light of this new learning environment this pilot study tentatively assesses the results of those changes as it relates to the connection between motivation, personality and learning results.

### **Educational shifts in Japan**

Recently we are seeing education reforms in Japan which highlight “a stronger emphasis on communication” (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001, p. 70). MEXT (2014b) reveal that “English education” in high school “should focus on the development of communication skills to convey ideas and feelings in English, rather than grammar and translation” . We are seeing a change in education from passive learning to a more active learning through the integrative goal for these Japanese students to have the “ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons” (MEXT, 2014a). These reforms will be achieved by having “classes conducted in English with high-level linguistic activities”, through “presentations, debates and negotiations” (MEXT, 2014a). Aubrey (2014) describes the reforms as being a shift in the L2 learner’ s notion of “English for exams” to becoming the struggle for “English for communication” (p. 154). In his study, Aubrey (2014) found that the ought-to self significantly influences the ideal L2 self, and suggests that these new “communicative English classes may be a source of motivation for students” (p. 164).

### **Motivation**

The groundwork for motivation research was laid by Gardner (1985) in bilingual Canada who pioneered research on integrative/instrumental motivation. Integrativeness is motivation that stems from the L2 learners' desire to integrate with the target culture. Instrumentality is where the learners want to learn a L2 for an academic or job purpose. This construct, while effective for bilingual Canada, did not take into account countries where L2 is taught as a school subject with limited integration, such as in Japan.

Dörnyei (1994) began to look at motivation from a more education-centred approach. Dörnyei (2005) fully explains the limitations of Gardner’ s motivational theory of L2 acquisition as “not an elaborate model but a schematic of how motivation is related to other ID variables and language achievements” (p. 68). To address these shortcomings Dörnyei (2009) developed the L2 motivational self system which “represents a major reformation of previous motivational thinking by its explicit utilisation of psychological theories of the self” (p. 9). This motivation construct has its roots both with Gardner, and also with Marcus and Nurius (1986) who developed the idea of selves. There are three major components which make up the L2 motivational self system.

1. The Ideal L2 Self. This is the self image the learner paints of themselves. If the learner wants to make international friends and communicate fluently then the learner will construct that image of themselves. It is regarded as a powerful motivator made up of integrative and instrumental motivation.

2. The Ought-to L2 Self. This “concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). It corresponds to extrinsic motivation of meeting obligations and responsibilities which may be instrumental such as achieving a high test score (Noels, 2003; Ushioda, 2001)

3. L2 Learning Experience. This is “related to the immediate learning environment and experience” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29) and refers to the impact of the L2 teacher, the peer group, the curriculum, the experience of success. Unlike the extrinsic nature of ‘The Ought-to L2 Self’, the ‘L2 Learning Experience’ corresponds to that of intrinsic motivation (Noels, 2003; Ushioda, 2001).

### Personality

There are a plethora of subfields dedicated to defining the major and stable personality traits of the L2 learner. Some of the pertinent results are presented here. In previous studies by Eysenck and Cookson (1969), and Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic and McDougall (2003), it has been seen that introverts had the advantage in language learning. This may be true where there is an instrumental goal, but with the new integrative goals being encouraged by the Japanese education reforms we may be seeing classrooms which require students to exhibit more extroverted language learning behavior.

One method for analysing personality traits is the Big Five, which broadly subsumes “most personality traits within five broad bipolar dimensions” (Goldberg, et al. 1992). These dimensions include 1. Extraversion and Surgency, 2. Agreeableness 3. Conscientiousness 4. Emotional Stability also called neuroticism, and 5. Intellect or Openness to Experience (Goldberg et al. 1992). Using the Big Five personality traits, Ghapanchi found that “personality is related to L2 motivation and proficiency” (Ghapanchi, Khajavy, & Asadpour, 2011). The motivational behavioral study showed that language learners who were “more extroverted and open to new experiences were more proficient language learners” (Ghapanchi, et al. 2011). In a study by Komarraju, Karau, and Schmeck (2009) predicting college students’ academic motivation and achievement using the Big Five personality traits, they discovered that openness in students’ personality was related to intrinsic motivation and suggested that students who are intellectually curious are more likely to enjoy learning. Papi (2010) goes further to explain that the ideal L2 self “is much stronger than the impact from the ought-to L2 self on intended effort” (p. 475), meaning individual students’ personality traits, regarding the ideal L2 self, can potentially have a greater impact than the ought-to self in a similar L2 learning experience. This pilot study applies the Big Five personality traits to Japanese university undergraduate students to discover links between personality traits and motivation. It also looks at how this affects the L2 learners’ perceived proficiency.

### **Research questions**

1. Does the L2 motivational self system correlate to personality traits?
2. Are the L2 motivational self system variables predictive of perceived English proficiency?
3. Are the Big Five Personality Traits related to the L2 motivational self system variables?

### **Participants**

A total of 146 Japanese undergraduate students from two universities in Japan took part in this study. Of the respondents 120 surveys were fully and correctly completed. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 20 (Mean=18.48, SD=0.62). 64 males and 53 females with 3 students who did not wish to indicate gender.

### **Materials**

#### **L2 Motivational Self System variables**

The L2 motivational self system variables were assessed by 15 items from Papi (2010) on a 7-point scale. The variables measured were based on Dörnyei's (2003) guidelines and adapted and translated by Aubrey (2014) from items used by Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009). The items measured ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. The items and their translations have been extensively piloted in studies by Aubrey (2014) and by Aubrey and Nowlan (2013); as such they were used without modification. These variables and translations can be found in appendix A.

#### **Personality**

Personality was assessed using the Goldberg et al. (1992) personality trait inventory on a 5-point scale. This was a 50-item measure of the Big Five Personality Traits acquired from the International Item Pool. There have been various studies done showing validity of fewer item scales (Namikawa, et al., 2012; Wada, 1996) for maximum effectiveness the full 50-item measure was used in our study. The English and Japanese version of the scale can be found in appendix B.

#### **English Language Proficiency**

A self-rating scale of 5-points was used to assess English language proficiency. Students rated themselves in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The scale was anchored with very unskilled, and very skilled. Self-rating scales have been used by many researchers (Duan, 2006; Ghapanchi et al, 2011; Taguchi, et al. 2009; Papi, 2010; Dewaele, 2002; Dewaele, 2005; Zhou, 2016) and therefore were deemed to be the most reliable method for our study.

#### **Procedures**

The researchers explained the purpose of the study to students in their classes. Students who

showed interested were given the questionnaire to complete either in a designated time or as homework. The questionnaire was completely anonymous and students understood that they would receive no grade in return for participation. The questionnaire took about 15 minutes to complete.

## Results

The data was first analyzed for its suitability and normality. As expected with 120 data points the data did not show normalcy, yet when considering both the skewness and the kurtosis values it was decided that the data was adequate for further analysis.

Table 1 Statistical data for L2 motivational self system

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Ideal L2 Self	15.96	6.39	0.084	2.26
Ought-to L2 Self	16.25	5.23	0.500	3.97
L2 Learning Experiences	23.23	5.73	0.080	2.40

To understand the degree to which students in this study were motivated, the mean and standard deviation of the L2 motivational self system were calculated. These results can be found in table 1. With these results, it becomes clear that the students who took part in this study were largely unmotivated. Ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self showed similar result with low levels of motivation, although there was greater variation in ideal L2 self. L2 learning experiences proved to be the strongest motivating factor for students.

The L2 motivational self system was assessed with a maximum possible score of 35. Ideal L2 self had a mean of 15.96 which, falling below the midpoint of 17.5, showed that the students in this study were not motivated due to their ideal L2 self. This was similar to the mean for ought-to L2 self which was 16.25. L2 learning experience had the highest mean at 23.23, this score being higher than the expected average for students who were neither motivated or unmotivated showed that L2 learning experiences were the strongest motivating factor for the students in this study.

Table 2 Statistical data for personality traits

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Extroversion	27.88	13	44	31	7.07	-0.11	2.48
Agreeableness	34.32	20	50	30	5.36	0.28	3.18
Conscientious	30.71	15	43	28	5.72	-0.42	3.13
Emotional stability	28.33	13	45	32	6.65	-0.11	2.76
Openness	29.30	19	43	24	4.30	0.48	3.67

As can be seen in table 2 there was considerable variation in the personality of the students in this study. Extroversion showed the highest variation with a standard deviation of 7.07, followed by emotional stability with 6.65. This data is not revealing as the mean score for the students does not indicate any particular personality traits, rather it is by considering the range that we can see that the students in this study had personality types across the spectrum. The minimum and the maximum scores also show that there were students with highly varied personality types.

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Ideal-self	15.96	6.36	1								
2 ought to	16.25	5.2	0.314	1							
3 L2 Learning Experience	23.23	5.7	0.528	0.0382	1						
4 Extroversion	27.88	7.04	0.174	0.009***	0.054***	1					
5 Emotional Stability	28.33	6.62	-0.025***	-0.015***	0.059***	0.234**	1				
6 Agreeableness	34.32	5.34	.013**	0.208*	0.262*	0.263**	0.144***	1			
7 Conscientiousness	30.71	5.7	.069*	0.256	0.3	0.043***	0.124***	0.381	1		
8 Openness	29.3	4.28	0.45	0.07***	0.147***	0.246**	0.056***	0.283	0.191*	1	
9 Proficiency	13.73	4.153	0.427	0.176*	0.414	0.086***	-0.008***	0.084***	0.273**	0.323	1

\*\*\*ns \*\*p=<.001 \*p=<.05

Correlation statistics are presented in table 3.

There was a positive, statistically significant relationship between ideal L2 self and openness ( $r=.45$   $p<.001$ ) and to perceived proficiency ( $r=.427$   $p<.001$ ). There was a smaller correlation between ideal-self and extroversion ( $r=.174$   $p<.001$ ) as well as a slight correlation to conscientiousness ( $r=.069$   $p<.05$ ). There was no significant relation to agreeableness or emotional stability. Ought-to self was correlated to agreeableness ( $r=.208$   $p<.05$ ) and conscientiousness ( $r=.256$   $p<.001$ ). No significant relationship was found between ought-to self and perceived proficiency, extroversion, emotional stability or openness. L2 learning experience was positively and significantly related to agreeableness ( $r=.262$   $p<.05$ ), and proficiency ( $r=.414$   $p<.001$ ). No significant relationship was found between L2 learning experience and extroversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, or openness.

## Discussion

This pilot study tentatively assessed the relationship between personality, L2 motivational self system variables, and self perceived language proficiency. The first research question was: does the L2 motivational self system correlate to personality traits. It was found that emotional stability and agreeableness do not strongly correlate to L2 motivated self systems. There was a small degree of correlation between traits, but due to relatively high  $p$  values most of these numbers were not statistically significant. There was a small correlation between the L2 motivation self system and conscientiousness. The only strong relationship is between ideal L2 self and openness ( $r=.45$   $p<.001$ ).

This suggests that personality alone is not sufficient to predict L2 motivated self system variables. Students who exhibit personality traits such as extroversion or agreeableness may not be any better at developing L2 language skills than students who are introverted and disagreeable. Ghapanchi et al. (2011) found that extroversion was positively correlated to language proficiency in Iranian students, the results of this study find that while Japanese students do exhibit a correlation between extroversion and the L2 motivational self system that correlation is weak. This may be explained by previous studies by Eysenck and Cookson (1969), and Furnham et al. (2003) who showed that introverts have an advantage over extroverts in language learning because they spend more time studying alone. The results of this study show no correlation between these traits, which considering the complicated relationship between intro/extroversion and language learning, was to be expected. For students there is an advantage to being extroverted, since learning a language is more than only "learning-by-doing" (Shehan, 1989) extroverts may have an advantage over introverts.

The second research question asked what the connection between the L2 motivational self system and students' perceived proficiency was. Perceived proficiency showed a clear connection to the L2 motivational self systems. Students with higher scores for ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience consistently rated their proficiency as higher. The correlation between ought-to L2 self and perceived proficiency was low.

An unexpected result was that proficiency and openness showed a strong relationship. There was a clear and strong connection between the students' openness and their perceived English skills. This is understandable as there is also a strong correlation between extroversion and openness. Students who are more extroverted tend to also be more open, these students in turn tend to evaluate their proficiency positively.

Finally we assess the extent that the big five personality traits were connected to the L2 motivational self system. Clearly there is a strong connection between students' reasons for learning English, their motivation, and their ability. The study shows that personality traits alone are not enough to explain students' ability to learn a language. In fact, the results suggest that the reasons students have for learning a language are far more important than any personality traits. The connection between students' personality, L2 motivational self systems, and perceived proficiency is complex. It is an over simplification to state that personality alone can predict language acquisition. Some students may be intrinsically predisposed to learning language due to ideal personality traits, while other students are motivated for different reasons. Clark and Schroth (2009) found that language teachers must provide adequate incentives for learners by planning and teaching to individual needs. This means creating a 'L2 learning experience' which encourages the students to discover their motivational interests through the L2.

## Conclusion

In this study the connection between L2 motivational self systems and personality traits of undergraduates from two universities in Japan was investigated. The results indicate that the motivation of these Japanese students is similar to that of students in other learning contexts in terms of the connection between their perceived English ability and their L2 motivational self systems. This study also found that the connection between personality traits and students' performance is more complex and subtle than expected. More research is needed into this issue. In some areas, Japanese students showed strong correlations. However, the correlation was not as clearly defined as in other studies. This combined with the strong correlation between perceived proficiency and the ought-to self suggests that cultural differences may impact students' attitudes towards foreign language learning more than personality traits alone. There is also the possibility that the Big Five Personality inventory may not be a good fit for Japanese students. Indeed when assessing personality it is essential to consider the culture context for a better understanding of how personality informs behavior. Further research is suggested in both these areas to clarify the connection between personality and language acquisition.

The fact there is a clear connection between L2 learning experiences and proficiency is significant as it supports the move of MEXT (2014a) towards a more communication based classroom. Students who possess a strong ideal L2 self, tended to rate their proficiency as higher than those who did not. The ideal L2 self is indeed indicative that those students wish to be able to use English for more than passing tests. As Japan's education system changes it must do so in a manner that does not simply value communication without understanding that it is the desire



to communicate which can drive students' motivation and in turn produce students who are better able to use English outside the classroom.

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## Appendix A.

Ideal L2 self questions	
In the future, I can imagine myself as a person who has the ability to express his or her opinions or thoughts accurately in English.	将来、英語で意見や思いを正確に伝える事が出来るようになって自分が想像できる。
In the future, I can imagine myself as a person whose strength is being competent in English.	将来、的確な英語が使える事を強みとしている自分が想像できる。
In the future, I can imagine myself as a person who uses English in his or her daily life.	将来、毎日の生活で英語を使っている自分が想像できる。
In the future, I can imagine myself as a person who does not hesitate to speak English.	将来、英語を躊躇せずに話す事のできる自分が想像できる。
In the future, I can imagine myself as a person who understands English movies or music without Japanese subtitles.	将来、日本語の字幕や翻訳無しで英語の映画や音楽を理解できる自分が想像できる。
Ought-to L2 self	
I study English because close friends of mine think it is important.	英語を勉強しているのは、仲の良い友人達が英語を勉強することは大切だと思っているからである。
Learning English is necessary because people surrounding me expect me to do so	周囲の人間が私が英語ができる事を期待しているから、英語を勉強するのは必須である。
It will have a negative impact on my life if I don't study English.	英語を勉強しなかったら私の人生に良くない影響がある。
I have to study English, because, if I do not study it, I think my parents will be disappointed with me.	もし勉強しなかったら両親が自分に失望すると思うので、英語を勉強しなければならないと思う。
My parents believe that I must study English to be an educated person.	教養のある人間として英語は必須であると両親は信じている。
L2 Learning experiences	
I always look forward to English classes.	どの英語の授業もいつも楽しみだ。
I find English really interesting.	英語はとても興味深いと思う。
I really enjoy learning English.	英語を勉強するのが楽しい。
I think that time passes faster while studying English.	英語を勉強していると時間が過ぎるのが早く感じる。
I would like to have more English classes at university.	大学で今より多くの英語の授業を履修したい。

## Appendix B.

### Personality trait assessments

1. 盛り上げ役である	(1+)	Am the life of the party.
2. 他人を気づかうことはない	(2-)	Feel little concern for others.
3. いつも用意周到である	(3+)	Am always prepared.
4. すぐにストレスがたまってしまう	(4-)	Get stressed out easily.
5. 語彙が豊富である	(5+)	Have a rich vocabulary.
6. おしゃべりではない	(1-)	Don't talk a lot.
7. 他人に興味がある	(2+)	Am interested in people.
8. 持ち物が整理できないほうだ	(3-)	Leave my belongings around.
9. いつもリラックスしていることが多い	(4+)	Am relaxed most of the time.
10. 抽象的な考えを理解するのが苦手だ	(5-)	Have difficulty understanding abstract ideas.
11. 人前でもあがらない	(1+)	Feel comfortable around people.
12. 人を馬鹿にするほうだ	(2-)	Insult people.
13. 細かいことに気がつく	(3+)	Pay attention to details.
14. 心配性である	(4-)	Worry about things.
15. 想像力が豊かである	(5+)	Have a vivid imagination.
16. 引っ込み思案である	(1-)	Keep in the background.
17. 人に共感しやすい	(2+)	Sympathize with others' feelings.
18. 無茶なことをする	(3-)	Make a mess of things.
19. 落ち込むことはめったにない	(4+)	Seldom feel blue.
20. 抽象的な考えには興味がない	(5-)	Am not interested in abstract ideas.
21. 自分から話しかけるほうである	(1+)	Start conversations.

22. 他人の問題には興味がない	(2-)	Am not interested in other people's problems.
23. すぐに雑用を済ませる	(3+)	Get chores done right away.
24. 動揺しやすい	(4-)	Am easily disturbed.
25. 素晴らしいアイデアを持っている	(5+)	Have excellent ideas.
26. あまり話すことがない	(1-)	Have little to say.
27. 優しい心を持っている	(2+)	Have a soft heart.
28. 整理整頓を怠りがち	(3-)	Often forget to put things back in their proper place.
29. 慌てやすい	(4-)	Get upset easily.
30. アイディアが乏しいほうだ	(5-)	Do not have a good imagination.
31. パーティでは色々な人と話すほうだ	(1+)	Talk to a lot of different people at parties.
32. 他人にはまったく興味がない	(2-)	Am not really interested in others.
33. 整頓するのが好きである	(3+)	Like order.
34. 気分をコロコロ変える	(4-)	Change my mood a lot.
35. ものわかりが良いほうだ	(5+)	Am quick to understand things.
36. 人から注目を浴びるのは好きではない	(1-)	Don't like to draw attention to myself.
37. 他の人のために時間を割くほうだ	(2+)	Take time out for others.
38. 仕事や学習をさぼることが多い	(3-)	Shirk my duties.
39. 気分が著しく変化するほうだ	(4-)	Have frequent mood swings.
40. 難しい言葉を使うほうだ	(5+)	Use difficult words.
41. 注目の的になるのは嫌ではない	(1+)	Don't mind being the center of attention.
42. 他の人の気持ちがわかる	(2+)	Feel others' emotions.

	43. 予定に従うほうだ	(3+)	Follow a schedule.
	44. イライラしやすい	(4-)	Get irritated easily.
	45. いろんなことを反省しては時間を過ごす	(5+)	Spend time reflecting on things.
	46. 人見知りする	(1-)	Am quiet around strangers.
	47. 人を安心させる	(2+)	Make people feel at ease.
	48. 張り切って仕事や学習に取り組むほうだ	(3+)	Am exacting in my work.
	49. 落ち込むことが多い	(4-)	Often feel blue.
	50. アイディアが豊富である	(5+)	Am full of ideas.
	49. 落ち込むことが多い	(4-)	Often feel blue.
	50. アイディアが豊富である	(5+)	Am full of ideas.

Each set of five questions is related to (1) Extraversion, (2) Agreeableness, (3) Conscientiousness, (4) Emotional Stability, and (5) Intellect/Imagination.

Negatively scored items are marked (-) and positive scores with (+).